



Charlie Janes

Conservationist~Pilot~Author

A German philosopher once said, ‘if you don’t enjoy solitude, you’ll never enjoy freedom’. Most of us think of solitude as a few hours by ourselves during the day doing a job, or getting from

A to B. Solitude that is never far from our comfort zones, certainly not the same one which that thinker had in mind. But Charlie Janes can relate to it. To get to his residency, you can take one of two options: 1. Fly in, in his homemade Protech, or 2. Drive in, by taking a sharp left north of Putorino, then travelling for over an hour along a gravel road through Carter

Holt-owned forest, ghost settlements, across rivers, through creeks, a number of locked gates, until you hit native bush, where, if you are lucky enough to experience a flat tyre, you will suddenly be aware of a new sort of world, one where the call of native birds ricochet past you and wild hoof prints in the mud state you are definitely outnumbered. His place is about as far away from society as you could get, and it’s just the way he likes it.

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► “I’ve been out here for nine years, nine years of paradise,” recalls Charlie. “When I first arrived, this hut was derelict and the airstrip was waist high grass with shoulder height manuka. The access track had toitoi so tall I had a guy walk in front of me with his hand up so I could drive my tractor where the road should’ve been. I also drove a heavy mower up and down to clear the airstrip. From then on I used a wheel tractor with a back blade, explosives, old bulldozer, anything you could shake a stick at to push the bush over and clear it. She was pretty rugged, and it took a long time, but it’s been neat.

A couple of years back, I was out at Te Awanga with the Leg-Up Trust doing some work with the horse treks, when I happened to chance upon a Hatuma representative, Bill Nicholson. I’d just cleared an area of blackberry beside the Maraetotara Stream, so I asked him what his thoughts were and he told me about dicalcic. I got a tonne of it, borrowed a little spreader, and stuck it on. We saw the results from that, because after a while some of the neighbour’s stock began getting through fences to graze the Trust’s pasture – even though we only had about five acres and they were already in a ninety-acre paddock with heaps of grass.

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When I first arrived here and mowed the airstrip, you wouldn’t see any, what you’d call, ‘domestic birds’ like blackbirds or thrushes, that sort of thing. There’d be kereru flying over, the odd fantail flittering around, but nothing on the strip. Since putting on the dicalcic that’s changed. I remember one morning about a month ago I was looking out the window and I counted seven blackbirds and four thrushes . . . now they don’t come here to eat rocks. It amazed me. The ground’s come alive – there are now earthworms here. The dicalcic has brought that life to it. That’s what dicalcic’s appeal to me is, it’s natural, and it works with the soil, not against it. Now I’ve got paradise ducks, plovers, as well as rabbits and deer – it’s been really great; the development has brought everything in.”

During an early stage, Charlie wondered why the new pasture was looking more like a bowling green compared to the sides of the access path where there was lush grass. Then it dawned on him; the whole place was littered with deer droppings. “The most deer I’ve counted grazing on the new area is eleven – all hinds except for three yearlings. A month later they all vanished and I figured they were off having their babies. A couple of weeks ago the first mums arrived back with their fawns, all chasing each other around; it was neat to see. One morning there was quite a bit of early morning fog, and I decided to go out dressed in camo gear with a camera. Visibility was probably fifty metres, fluctuating down to twenty. I was amongst a group of deer and as the mist dropped I could move closer to them. There was a hind with a youngster, and the youngster was sort of watching me thinking, ‘that stump keeps on moving, it was over there a second ago’. I ended up about fifteen metres away, going click, click, click with the camera. The mum kept looking at me, but I’d stay stock-still, and she’d begin grazing again. Finally a yearling wandered around and decided I made a bad man-stump, and the place was suddenly filled with flying hooves. In the spring I’ll go out early mornings just to see the deer; it’s such a neat sight, believe me. And to think they used to be harassed by helicopters and poachers; now they’ve got a sanctuary. I’ve had my share of run-ins with poachers on the property; had some meaningful discussions with a few of them, got that sorted, prosecuted a couple, got that sorted. Thankfully, not everyone is like that. Good guys who call in to pass the time of day are welcome, and are invariably invited to stay for a brew.”

Apart from trapping bush predators, such as cats, rats and stoats, for the last three years Charlie has been running a horse trekking programme for those wanting to get away from it all. He started it initially to support the horses, but has since found that if he works hard enough skinning possums he can support both him and the horses. “I get lots of clover up here now that I’ve put on the dicalcic, and the horses really enjoy it. I never have any problems with their health – you only have to look at them to see that. The horses are great, they don’t talk back to you, and they don’t want a cup of tea at eleven o’clock at night. I still do the odd trek; most people come out for three days and I supply everything for them. The longest trek goes for four hours riding, but by the time we’ve stopped to boil the



billy, and lead the horses over the really hard bits of the river bed, it can end up taking most of the day. It's great having people who can appreciate the bush, it really is a magic place."

Charlie's hut was originally built in 1987 after the builder and his wife were looking for somewhere to stay and trap possums. They eventually moved on and told Charlie about it. He moved in during 1996, after the Wellington owners offered him a job to manage the area and maintain the access tracks. He extended the hut by a couple of metres, replaced the floors, shovelled out the possum droppings, and generally fixed it up so it was livable. He also set up a tack shed / workshop, a gas powered shower, and a large sheltered bivouac that fits a tent for the horse trekkers. The agreement with the owners eventually led to a handshake lease on part of it, which Charlie has been hanging on to like a bull ever since. "The thing I love about here is the peace – 'peace' with a capital 'P'. I guess I see myself as a sort of caretaker of the place."

After writing a couple of short stories for an aviator's magazine, a friend of his sent a copy of one to Reed Publishers. A week later Charlie was offered a contract to write a whole book. His first one, *Hunting For Trouble*, was written in the mid-80's. That led to *Hell For Leather*, *Time For A Brew*, *The Turkey Has Landed* and *Possum On A Cold Tin Roof*, which was based on this particular hut. "I run into guys all over the place asking me when I'm going to write another book. I even got a Christmas card from some chap in Raetihi telling me to hurry up and do another one. People seem to enjoy them, so I continue writing them; it's something I find very natural to do. I keep an old journal of all the interesting things that happen around here. I'm very near to starting my next book, but then I've been saying that for a couple of years."

Charlie started flying in 1971 in an old Auster doing venison recovery mainly around the Kawekas and Kaimanawas. The problem with the Auster was that it finally ran out of hours, so he built his own low wing Jodel. "I flew that for a few years, until I went down south, where I decided I needed a high wing. So I got another Auster, put a V8 engine in it with the blessing of Civil Aviation, and flew that for a while. But soon after I flew straight into court because I didn't actually ask them if I could use it in the air. That thing ran like a Swiss watch: started instantly, used no oil, and half as much fuel as the original – a real dream. Not conventional, but it worked beautifully. One Civil Aviation turkey even said to me that I'd rip my wings off! So I had to get rid of it. I stopped the venison recovery in the mid '80's. In the end I was doing it just to keep the plane working, but it was better than standing on a street corner busking. I did it for while with horses, but that required three-times more work. Then I built a jet boat, but found the Mohaka River was full of real rocks, not rubber rocks, so the insurance company quickly told me to go away. I built a gyrocopter, but after one trial flight I was too scared to continue, so I went back to a fixed-wing. About six years ago I built this one. Normally I'd have just one seat because the remainder of the aircraft is for pulling out venison. Once you get three complete deer in a light aircraft it starts to get pretty crowded, and then you have to try make room for the dog. Guys like myself, the bush pilots, we keep our heads down, don't rock the boat too much, mind our own business, abide by whatever rules we have to, and we find people sort of leave you alone generally. It's great having your own plane; you can travel a long way by air and get to some remote areas. I always make a note of where potential airstrips are, in real neat places, and if I can, drop in for a look round."

▲ Top right:
The outside &
inside of the hut
- originally built
in 1987